

**04/01/21 Thursday**

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Biden Holds First Cabinet Meeting After Unveiling \$2 Trillion Infrastructure Plan  
by [Mary F.](#)

US President Joe Biden on Thursday held his first Cabinet meeting in the East Room. The meeting comes after the president introduced this week a sweeping \$2 trillion infrastructure and jobs package to remold the American economy.

All 16 permanent members of the Cabinet, including Vice President Kamala Harris and the heads of the executive departments, attended the Thursday cabinet meeting in person. Biden began the meeting by delegating five cabinet secretaries, namely Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, Housing Secretary Marcia L. Fudge, Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm and Labor Secretary Marty Walsh to serve as his emissaries on his infrastructure plan.

"These cabinet secretaries will represent me in dealing with Congress, engage the public in selling the plan, and help work out the details as we refine it and move forward," Biden said, [The New York Times reported.](#)

Biden also told his cabinet to "take a hard look at their agency spending" to ensure taxpayer money was going to US workers and companies.

Biden unveiled his \$2 trillion infrastructure plan on Wednesday. The proposal allocates \$155 billion to repair roads and bridges, \$40 billion to improve public housing and \$111 billion to ensure that drinking water is not contaminated.

In addition, the plan allocates around \$100 billion to go toward public school buildings and \$180 billion to research and development, [NBC News reported.](#)

The plan would also fix bridges and roads in need of reconstruction as well as establish a network of electric vehicle charging systems. As part of the plan, Biden would also hike the corporate tax rate from 21% to 28%.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell on Wednesday hinted that he is unlikely to support the infrastructure bill if it involves raising taxes or deficit spending.

"This is not going to be apparently an infrastructure package. It's like a Trojan horse. So it's called infrastructure but inside the Trojan horse is going to be more borrowed money and massive tax increases," he said, [The Hill reported.](#)

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UN Special Envoy Warns of Imminent Bloodbath in Myanmar if Security Council Does Not Act  
by [Mary F.](#)

Over the weekend, Myanmar security forces killed at least 114 civilians across various cities, prompting the United Nations to urge the international community to help protect the country's peaceful demonstrators.

United Nations Special Envoy of the Secretary-General Christine Schraner Burgener warned the Security Council on Wednesday that a "bloodbath is imminent" in Myanmar if action is not taken to halt the military crackdown against protesters, CBS News reported.

"Looking back ten years from now, how will history judge this inaction?" Burgener asked the diplomats, as CBS News reported. "I hope you can act while there is still time to avoid the worst outcome by overcoming caution and disagreement."

In her remarks, Burgener revealed that more than 520 people have been killed since democratically elected members of Myanmar's ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), was toppled by Myanmar's armed forces, the Tatmadaw, on February 1.

"Already vulnerable groups requiring humanitarian assistance, including ethnic minorities and the Rohingya people, will suffer most. But inevitably, the whole country is on the verge of spiraling into a failed state," Burgener noted.

"I will remain open to dialogue and continue to signal this but if we wait only for when [the military leaders] are ready to talk, the ground situation will only worsen. A bloodbath is imminent," Burgener added.

On Thursday, Myanmar's military ordered internet service providers to shut down wireless broadband services, Reuters reported. A lawyer for Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's deposed leader, also revealed this week that the opposition leader had been charged the week before in Yangon with breaching the country's secrets law, Al-Jazeera reported.

Suu Kyi and other members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) have been detained since the February 1 coup.

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Swiss Company Develops UV Light Robots to Kill COVID-19 on Passenger Planes  
by [Mary E.](#)

Ultraviolet (UV) light is a type of electromagnetic radiation that has more energy than radio waves or visible light. UV light has been shown to kill bacteria and viruses, including the outer proteins coating of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

UVeya, a Swiss start-up company, has developed robots that can deploy virus-killing UV light to kill SARS-CoV-2.

According to a report by [Reuters](#), UVeya and Dubai-based airport services company Dnata are currently conducting trials of the robot inside Embraer jets from Helvetic Airways.

One robot can disinfect a single-aisled plane in around 13 minutes, the report noted.

Although the trials are currently underway, the devices have not yet been certified and aircraft makers are unsure what effect the light could have on interior upholstery, which could fade after exposure to the light.

"This is a proven technology, it's been used for over 50 years in hospitals and laboratories, it's very efficient," UVeya co-founder Jodoc Elmiger told Reuters Wednesday.

"It doesn't leave any trace or residue," he added, also noting that he estimates the robots will sell for around \$16,000.

"If our passengers, if our crew know our aircraft are safe - that there are no viruses or bacteria - it could help them to fly again," Mehdi Guenin, a Helvetic spokesperson, also told the outlet.

According to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), UV-C radiation, which refers to UV light between 200 nanometers and 280 nanometers, destroys the outer coating of SARS-CoV-2, which leads to the inactivation of the virus.

The application of UV-C to disinfection is mostly used in medication sanitation. It has also been used to sterilize wastewater. Despite UV-C's disinfectant properties, it is hazardous to most living things. Exposure to germicidal wavelengths of UV light can lead to sunburn, skin cancer, vision impairment or even blindness in some cases.

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WHO's COVID-19 Origins Team Member Says 'Demonstrably False' Attacks on Report  
'Undermine Science'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Since before the the 12-nation team of scientists visited Wuhan, China, earlier this year in an attempt to discover the origins of the virus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, Western nations and corporate media outlets were claiming China would block their efforts, reviving politically useful but scientifically discredited conspiracy theories.

In the wake of the World Health Organization (WHO) team's report from Wuhan on the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, the US and its allies have cried foul, claiming the Chinese government fouled their investigation after it failed to point the finger at Beijing.

However, the scientists who led the probe are now pushing back, saying their academic report has unnecessarily become a political football.

"Multiple attacks daily, demonstrably false, but gullible followers believe them." That's how Peter Daszak, a New York-based zoologist who was part of the international team of scientists that visited China's Hubei Province earlier this year, described the reactions of "a gang of right-wing media outlets" [on Twitter on Wednesday](#).

"Real issue is that this undermines science and ironically puts US citizens at risk by leading us into rabbit hole conspiracies instead of better understanding of how to prevent pandemics," he added.

The WHO's report, [released on Tuesday](#), gave the theory the virus escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology [the least credence](#) of the four theories it examined, calling it "extremely unlikely," but noting that "more timely and comprehensive data" is needed to draw firmer conclusions. The other three theories - direct and intermediate zoonotic spillover and cold food chain transmission - are all considered somewhere between possible and very likely. They also

raised an additional possible vector: the 7th Military World Games, a huge military sports event Wuhan hosted in October 2019, two months before the first cases of the virus were detected.

#### Prepared Opposition to Report

Even before the report was released, the US and US-supportive academics were rallying against it. An [open letter written](#) on March 4 calls for a “full and unrestricted international forensic investigation into the origins of COVID-19,” claiming the WHO team “did not have the mandate, the independence, or the necessary accesses to carry out a full and unrestricted investigation into all the relevant SARS-CoV-2 origin hypotheses - whether natural spillover or laboratory/research related incident.”

The letter, signed by more than two dozen academics, was organized by Jamie Metz, a senior fellow at the hawkish Washington, DC-based Atlantic Council think tank, [which is funded by](#) a host of Western defense contractors, oil giants and banks, and Gilles Demaneuf, a data scientist at the Bank of New Zealand.

Demaneuf has [pushed the unfounded theory](#) that the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS, or SARS-CoV-1) escaped from a Chinese biology lab and the DRASTIC research group he presently heads has tried to claim the same about SARS-CoV-2 [through we-just-don't-know style essays](#) like that set to be published in the UK Spectator on Saturday.

The US State Department also [printed a statement](#) on Tuesday signed by 13 other nations calling for a “transparent and independent analysis and evaluation, free from interference and undue influence.” Secretary of State Antony [Blinken told CNN](#) on Sunday ahead of the report’s publication that the US has “real concerns about the methodology and the process” of the report, including that the Chinese government “apparently helped to write it.”

One unexpected critic of the report has been WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who [in comments accompanying](#) the report’s release said he did not believe “that this assessment was extensive enough” and explicitly noted that “although the team has concluded that a laboratory leak is the least likely hypothesis, this requires further investigation, potentially with additional missions involving specialist experts, which I am ready to deploy.”

#### Origins of the Lab Leak Theory

The “Wuhan lab leak” theory originated early in the COVID-19 outbreak, when Steve Bannon, a former executive at right-wing news outlet Breitbart and a close political ally of then-US President Donald Trump, teamed up with exiled Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui to create a platform for a researcher at the University of Hong Kong named Li-Meng Yan who formerly worked on viruses in the coronavirus family. According to Harvard University’s [Media Manipulation Casebook](#), Guo and Bannon brought Yan to the US, arranged a series of interviews for her, and bankrolled several self-published reports claiming to prove SARS-CoV-2 was a “Chinese bioweapon.”

While Yan’s claims were published on Guo’s and Bannon’s G News as early as January 25, 2020, the story was soon being carried everywhere from ZeroHedge to Fox News to the New York Post. Peter Navarro, an economist who served as the Trump administration’s Assistant to the President, Director of Trade and Manufacturing Policy, and Defense Production Act policy coordinator, even [tweeted out a story](#) about Yan’s report in September using the hashtag #ChinaLiedPeopleDied.”

By March 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 genome had already been sequenced and [scientists “irrefutably” concluded](#) the virus had not been engineered.

However, [Trump revived the theory](#) in May as the outbreak spiraled out of control and US deaths approached 100,000 people, and he began searching for someone to blame, despite having praised China's response to the outbreak earlier in the year. Since then, he and figures like Navarro and former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have continued to push the discredited theory, with former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director [Robert Redfield making](#) the claim just last week.

#### WHO Scientists Push Back

Daszak isn't the only member of the WHO team to push back against the naysayers: Peter Ben Embarek, an expert on zoonotic diseases at the WHO who led the Wuhan team, has pushed back on attempts by Metzl and other sympathetic academics trying to paint the report as a frustrated investigation.

"We did not do an investigation," [Embarek tweeted at Metzl](#) on March 10, in response to an invitation to meet with the open letter's signatories. "We conducted and evaluated joint scientific studies."

"I don't know why you (and the banker group) continue to call it an investigation," he [wrote the same day](#) to Alina Chan, a molecular biologist at the Broad Institute of Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has also signed the open letter under her [initials Y.A. Chan](#). "The international mission was designed as part of a series of scientific studies."

Chan has also [pushed the lab escape](#) theory about both SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2, [claiming in August](#) during a Twitter argument with a number of immunologists and virologists that the theory it came from nature "is not backed by evidence."

John Mackenzie, an Australian virologist who led the WHO's 2003 mission to study the origins of SARS, criticized the rare moment of disunity from Ghebreyesus, [telling Bloomberg](#) the WHO chief "should be standing by his committee's report" and noting he finds it "very strange that he's demeaning it and he's deflecting from it."

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's technical lead on COVID-19, told Bloomberg the data collected by her Chinese counterparts in late 2019 was the most comprehensive she's ever seen. Dutch virologist and WHO team member Marion [Koopmans noted on Twitter](#) that the US State Department's suggested methods were questionable at best.

"Go in and demand data? Would that be accepted in US, UK, Australia etc? Interested to hear," she mused.

During an interview with China Global Television Network (CGTN) on Wednesday, Daszak urged critics to "READ the report! It's hundreds of pages packed full of information that's not been seen before, testing of thousands of samples that haven't yet been published."

He further noted that, contrary to claims that their research was blocked by Chinese authorities, while in Wuhan "we met scientists who are ready, willing and able to collaborate." He noted the team had already intended to continue their investigation and welcomed support for their ongoing work, although he cautioned people to "decouple scientific research from political interference ... it's bad for our health!"

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Photos: Naturalists Fret After SpaceX's Rocket Explosion Litters Nearby Wetland With Debris  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

SpaceX has said it expects its Starship rockets to begin carrying commercial payloads as early as this year, although the company has so far failed to put one of the rockets on the ground safely without it exploding.

An ecological reserve near SpaceX's Texas launch facility was littered with debris after a Starship rocket exploded on Tuesday, arousing fury from naturalists that the materials would damage the habitat of several rare species.

After the SpaceX test of the SN11 rocket failed on Tuesday and the [rocket apparently exploded](#) in the skies over the Boca Chica launch facility, all of that debris had to go somewhere. As photos captured by Reuters show, hunks of metal scattered across the nearby wetlands of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Nature Wildlife Refuge.

One Twitter user posted a photo of a piece of the rocket they said they discovered at Isla Blanca Park, about five miles north of the launch pad. Speculating it was "tank insulation," they noted "it came from the sky, is warm, and smells like fuel of some sort."

[According to Wired](#), the Raptor engine used to power the Starship rockets is fueled by cryogenic liquid methane and liquid oxygen, as opposed to the kerosene more typical of space rockets. However, the carnage has environmentalists shook, with many taking to social media to express their outrage as well as to draw attention to several rare species that live in and around the marshes downrange of the launch facility.

Friends of the Wildlife Corridor, a conservationist organization that champions south Texas wildlife refuges from nearby Alamo, [wrote on its Facebook](#) page on March 31 that the result of SpaceX's "fail-fast, fix-fast approach" is "a series of explosions that rain down debris on the habitat."

Indeed, SpaceX founder Elon [Musk told Rolling Stone](#) in 2017 that at SpaceX, the rule is "Safety third. There's not even a rule number two. But even though there's nothing in second place, safety is not getting promoted to number two."

One amateur naturalist, a Cornell undergrad named Steven Wang, called attention to "an undescribed Temnothorax species that calls Boca Chica home" and the Boca Chica flea beetle, an extremely rare insect only known to live "immediately west of the beach-side dunes, east of Brownsville," [according to the Iowa State](#) University Department of Entomology.

"The area around SpaceX's launchpad is some of the last of its kind in the world, much of it previously lost to agriculture," Wang wrote. "Center of the continent & gateway to the tropics, it is one of the biologically richest areas in the US with a crazy mixmash of species found nowhere else."

However, SpaceX's rockets are just casting debris about down here on Earth: the second stage of a Falcon 9 rocket [was spotted burning up](#) in the Earth's atmosphere over the US Pacific Northwest last week, after it failed a reentry maneuver weeks earlier that was intended to send it plunging down over the unpopulated South Pacific.

Musk has been trying to perfect the Starship's vectored rocket engine, which will allow it to land in a vertical position, since tests began in 2019. However, [all four Starship](#) rockets that have attempted the maneuver [so far have failed](#), exploding in spectacular fireballs. The rockets are one day intended to ferry astronauts into space for orbital and beyond-orbital missions.

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Photos: Police Confirm Child Among Four Dead in California Office Shooting  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Authorities in Orange, California, took a 44-year-old suspect into custody Wednesday night after four people were shot dead in an office building. Since-deleted live footage from the scene showed the suspect - who sustained a gunshot wound - being carried out of the building before he was eventually taken to the hospital in critical condition.

The Orange Police Department confirmed during a Thursday morning [news conference](#) that a 9-year-old boy was one of the four individuals killed in the Wednesday evening shooting. Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer revealed that "[i]t appears that a little boy died in his mother's arms as she was trying to save him during this horrific massacre."

Additionally, a woman was left critically injured. No further details were provided about the victims because not all of their families have been notified.

The 44-year-old suspect was identified as Aminadab Gaxiola Gonzalez, a resident of the California city of Fullerton.

Orange Police Lt. Jennifer Amat, the department's public information officer, detailed that officers overheard gunshots when they first arrived at the scene around 5:30 p.m. local time Wednesday.

Responding cops were unable to immediately engage the suspect, as the door to the building's courtyard "had been locked from the inside" with "a bicycle-type cable lock."

Soon after, an "officer-involved shooting" occurred, allowing them to enter the courtyard, where they found the suspect with a gunshot wound. The 9-year-old boy's body was also found in the courtyard.

Amat noted authorities have already determined the attack was an isolated incident, and not a "random act of violence."

"The preliminary motive is believed to be related to a business and personal relationship which existed between the suspect and all of the victims," she said.

Though the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Los Angeles office responded to the incident, the Orange Police Department presently remains in charge of the related investigation.

The office shooting in Orange came as the third major US mass shooting in March.

Last month, a 21-year-old suspect with a self-proclaimed "sexual addiction" was apprehended in connection with the shooting deaths of eight individuals at three different spas in Atlanta, Georgia. Six of those killed were Asian women.

Another mass shooting occurred in Boulder, Colorado, on Monday, with a different 21-year-old suspect allegedly killing 10 people, including a police officer, at a King Soopers grocery store.

The string of shootings has intensified the national debate over US [gun laws](#), with US President Joe Biden and Democrats calling for the expansion of background checks. The US president has also floated using [executive power](#) to enact new gun reforms.

At the same, many Republicans have argued their fellow lawmakers should focus less on firearms, and more on [other factors](#) associated with mass shootings.

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UN Security Council Calls on Myanmar Military to Exercise Restraint, Pursue Dialogue  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Wednesday, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) met for the third time regarding the violence in Myanmar, which began following a military coup in February. Members of the group previously condemned the situation and its associated deaths on March 10.

UNSC President Dang Dinh Quy [detailed Thursday](#) that members of the security council are deeply concerned by the "rapidly deteriorating situation" in Myanmar and "strongly condemn" the violence that has led to the "deaths of hundreds of civilians, including women and children." Quy 's detailed that, during Wednesday's UNSC meeting, members of the group also "reiterated their call on the military to exercise utmost restraint" and emphasized "the need to fully respect human rights and to pursue dialogue and reconciliation in accordance with the will and interests of the people of Myanmar."

The UNSC also called for the release of all coup-related detainees, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.

"The Members of the Security Council called for safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to all people in need," the UNSC president remarked. "They also expressed concern that the recent developments pose particular risk serious challenges for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees and internally displaced persons."

According to Quy , the UNSC also highlighted that the "rights of ethnic minorities" must be "fully protected."

During the Wednesday meeting, UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General Christine Schraner Burgener reportedly warned that a "[bloodbath is imminent](#)" if the UNSC continues "inaction."

"I hope you can act while there is still time to avoid the worst outcome by overcoming caution and disagreement," Burgener said, following the death of at least 114 civilians in Myanmar over the weekend.

Myanmar's military seized power and announced a one-year state of emergency two months ago, pledging to take action against alleged voter fraud during the November 8 general election. The military claimed it was committed to the democratic system and vowed to hold new and fair elections after the state of emergency ends.

Protests have been held across Myanmar since the military took over. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) in Myanmar, over 420 people [have been killed](#) during the protests since the start of February and more than 2,420 people have been detained.

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US Supreme Court Unanimously Sides With Facebook, Dashes Hopes for Class-Action Suit on Text Alerts

by [Evan Craighead](#)

During initial arguments in Facebook, Inc. v. Duguid, Montana resident Noah Duguid claimed he was receiving Facebook security alerts regarding a Facebook account linked to his mobile device, despite not even having an account with the social media platform. Facebook said the man possibly had a "recycled cell phone number" that belonged to a user.

In a Thursday opinion, Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) Justice Sonia Sotomayor detailed that Facebook's automated text messages do not violate The Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA), which was enacted in 1991 to curb "abusive telemarketing practices by, among other things, imposing restrictions on making calls with an "automatic telephone dialing system."

As a result, the court reversed a previous judgment by a US Court of Appeals.

"Expanding the definition of an autodialer to encompass any equipment that merely stores and dials telephone numbers would take a chainsaw to these nuanced problems when Congress meant to use a scalpel," Sotomayor wrote.

The SCOTUS Justice argued Duguid's interpretation of the law would impact "virtually all modern cell phones, which have the capacity to 'store ... telephone numbers to be called' and 'dial such numbers.'"

"The TCPA's liability provisions, then, could affect ordinary cell phone owners in the course of commonplace usage, such as speed dialing or sending automated text message responses."

In a [separate ruling](#) Thursday, the SCOTUS upheld that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) could relax ownership rules because the Free Press studies set forth by Prometheus Radio Project failed to offer any "statistical analysis of the likely future effects of the FCC's proposed rule changes on minority and female ownership," according to SCOTUS Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who authored the Court's opinion.

"In short, the FCC's analysis was reasonable and reasonably explained for purposes of the APA's deferential arbitrary-and-capricious standard," the associate justice wrote.

"The FCC considered the record evidence on competition, localism, viewpoint diversity, and minority and female ownership, and reasonably concluded that the three ownership rules no longer serve the public interest," he added.

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Rouhani: US 'Dragging Their Feet' With JCPOA Compliance, Missing 'Golden Opportunity'

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Under the Biden administration, relations between the US and Iran have remained at a stalemate as neither side intends to resume their commitments to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action before the other party acts first. Reports have surfaced that the US is considering offering a new proposal before the looming Iranian elections. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani remarked on Thursday that the Biden administration is “dragging their feet” and utterly failing at taking advantage of its chance to return to the Iran nuclear deal the US withdrew from in 2018.

Rouhani reiterated to the Iranian public that Iran would willingly resume compliance to the 2015 deal, so long as the Biden White House returned as a signer and committed to its promises under the agreement, which include the lifting of its strict sanctions.

“This would mean a win-win bargain for the region and the entire world, which would benefit them,” the Iranian president [stated](#), referring to the US’ potential return. “The Americans were not able to understand that and failed to seize this golden opportunity.”

“They have been dragging their feet, and we have been getting messages and news, which show this new [US] administration is far from the reality about Iran,” Rouhani added, noting that the US officials have a “lack of knowledge” when it comes to the Middle Eastern nation. Rouhani went on to emphasize that although Iran has been the only party to shoulder the burden of the deal, it would “continue on the path of production, development, morality and constructive interaction to the end.”

At the time, former US President Donald Trump withdrew the Land of the Free from the nuclear deal in 2018 over unconfirmed allegations that Tehran had violated its commitments to the deal, underscoring that the deal was a failure of the Obama administration.

The remainder of the Trump years saw a so-called “maximum campaign” pressure against Iran, where on top of reimposing sanction against the nation, the US also tacked on additional financial hurdles on top of a slew of designations against its institutions.

Although the Biden administration has tiptoed around outlining its foreign policy with Iran, the US has opted to keep in place many Trump-era policies.

Incidentally, Rouhani’s remarks came days after [reports surfaced](#) that the Biden administration is weighing the possibility of putting forth a new proposal in order to ease tensions with Iran. Reports indicated that the proposal was expected to be released as soon as this week, although it’s likely Tehran will double down and urge Washington to simply return to the JCPOA.

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Memeified Success - Political Cartoon

For nearly one week, the massive, Panamanian-flagged cargo ship Ever Given took the internet - and the global economy - by storm after the vessel got stuck and blocked passage through Egypt’s Suez Canal. Although the financial setbacks caused by the blockage are still being reviewed, experts are forecasting tremendous losses.

As the world watched repeated failed rescue efforts of the Ever Given, cheeky netizens took the opportunity to use the event as fuel for churning out a slew of memes, a development that soon spurred canal workers to dig deeper to solve the crisis.

Memes focused on the Suez Canal crisis made references to the actions taken by fictional spy [Austin Powers](#) and, of course, saw netizens offer their own comedic takes on what [rescue plan](#) officials were due to take next, among others.

But while many laughed it up, that wasn't necessarily the case for workers trying to free the cargo ship.

In fact, for Eslam Negm, who watched the unblocking efforts take place onsite, the event was no laughing matter since Egypt's reputation was on the line. "No one was able to see how much pressure we were under," he told [The Washington Post](#).

However, while the memes continued to flood in, the group persevered in spite of the memes and eventually managed to free the vessel. Interestingly, the feat wasn't [warmlyaccepted](#) by [some netizens](#).

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Mummy March: Over 20 Mummies of Egypt's Kings, Queens Will Be Paraded to National Museum

Burial rituals of ancient Egyptians have long been a global area of interest and study for modern society, represented by a fascination with grand pyramids that still stand to this day. Years after their monarchs died, tomb robbery became rampant and the exhumation of ancient remains has become a huge part of both scientific research and tourism.

Egypt will be throwing a parade like none other this upcoming weekend, as the guests of honor will include a procession of 22 kings and queens who have been mummified for over 3,000 years.

Dubbed the Pharaohs' Golden Parade, the Saturday event will commence from the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square and travel along the River Nile to Al-Fustat, in old Cairo. It's expected that the mummies will be delivered to what will possibly be their final resting place in the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization ([NMEC](#)).

Aside from the mummies, the display hall located inside the museum will include X-rays and various scans of the mummies, as well as some of their belongings.

Sayed Abu-El Fadal, a spokesperson for the NMEC, explained to [CBS News](#) that "the new showroom is more like a one-way circle maze. All the walls are black, with spotlights on the mummies." He added that the display will be "designed like the tombs in the Valley of the Kings."

One of Egypt's primary sources of income is its tourism industry, and with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector [suffered greatly](#). Officials anticipate the parade will help to revitalize interest in Egypt as a destination in the global traveling enterprise.

The parade will be [livestreamed](#) by Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and will include the unveiling of an obelisk and the unboxing of four sphinxes. The procession will begin at

sunset and offer a grandiose festive, allowing each royal their own decorated vehicle complete with music, lights, costumes and horses.

The 22 royals include 18 kings and 4 queens from the 17th to the 20th dynasties of ancient Egypt, approximately 3,100 years to 3,500 years ago. The display will include 20 of the 22, while Queen Meritamun and Queen T will be put into storage. It is unsure why the two queens will not be put on display; however, [reports](#) seem to suggest that while the skull of Queen Meritamun is expected to be in good shape, there is too much risk of damage and lack of parts. The 20 to go on display, from oldest to youngest, are: Seqenenre Taall, Ahmose Nefertari, Amenhotep I, Thutmose I, Thutmose II, Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, Amenhotep II, Thutmose IV, Amenhotep III, Seti I, Ramses II, Merenptah, Seti II, Siptah, Ramses III, Ramses IV, Ramses V, Ramses VI and Ramses IX.

Some controversy circles this parade due to the [ongoing debate](#) over whether mummies should be left buried or reburied after research efforts are concluded, rather than put on display.

Digging graves is also forbidden in Islam. Dr. Ahmad Karima, a professor of Islamic law at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, argues, "These are our accentors, we shouldn't have them displayed for some dollars and euros." He reiterated that mummies should only be exhumed for science purposes and quickly reburied.

The Royal Mummies Hall was ordered to shutter for seven years after former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat visited the Egyptian Museum in 1980. Archaeologists debate that opposed to hiding the mummies, they need to instead be allowed to do their work to learn about the past because DNA tests and CT scans continue to change what we know about how ancient Egyptians lived and died.

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RPT: PREVIEW - US Hosts Japan, S. Korea Security Advisers as It Completes N. Korea Policy Review

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan hosts on Friday his counterparts from Japan Shigeru Kitamura and South Korea Suh Hoon as the Joe Biden administration nears the completion of its North Korea policy review.

Day-long trilateral consultations will be held at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, and are expected to cover a wide range of regional issues and foreign policy priorities, including maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and combating climate change.

"I think the most important reason for this trilateral is that it will give Jake and our team the opportunity to discuss our policy review on North Korea," a senior US administration official told reporters.

He reiterated that the review is in its final stages.

"We have done extensive consultations across the US government, in Congress, we have consulted previous individuals and teams that had been involved in diplomacy with North Korea. We are prepared now to have some final consultations with Japan and South Korea... I think it

would be fair to say that each of these countries are intensively interested in our plan," the official said.

Among specific issues likely to be raised he mentioned recent North Korea's missile tests, the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the country and its diplomacy with China.

National advisers also intend to have an extensive discussion of technological challenges with an emphasis on semiconductors supply chains.

"Our three countries hold many of the keys to the future of semiconductors manufacturing technology and we will seek to affirm the importance of keeping these sensitive supply chains secure," the official said.

The participants will voice "very serious" concerns about violence in Myanmar and China's aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific, discuss preparations for the global climate summit to be hosted virtually by US President Joe Biden later in April.

The meeting follows visits of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Japan and South Korea.

It's hailed by the White House as "the first National Security Adviser-level multilateral dialogue of the Biden administration, reflecting the importance we place on broadening and deepening our cooperation on key issues and advancing our shared prosperity across a free and open Indo-Pacific."

It's planned as a private event without media availability in a closed-down area.

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#### **US Watchdog Report Exposes Abuse at Migrant Detention Center, Use of Chemical Agents**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The US Homeland Security Department's Inspector General in a new report said it identified abuses and mistreatment of migrants at a detention center in the state of Arizona last year.

"From August to November of 2020, we conducted an unannounced remote inspection of the La Palma Correctional Center (LPCC) in Eloy, Arizona, and identified serious concerns regarding detainee care and treatment," the report said.

The report includes a snapshot of video footage showing LPCC staff firing pepper spray and chemical agents at detainees in the facility's housing area on April 13, 2020.

The report said migrant detainees described an environment of mistreatment and verbal abuse, especially after they peacefully protested the facility's failure to properly handle the novel coronavirus outbreaks.

In addition, the inspector general discovered that the facility's medical unit was understaffed, took more than three days to respond to detainee sick calls, and neglected to refill some prescription medications.

The ICE facility also did not provide a timely response to migrants over their grievances, and some cases were ignored, the report said.

The ICE facility is owned and operated by private company CoreCivic. It had a daily population of 978 all male detainees in 2020.

Moreover, the report said, citing a letter, that the facility allegedly used excessive force against migrant detainees, including pepper spray, pepper balls, and chemical agents, and punished protesting detainees with lengthy stays in segregation.

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#### **McConnell Calls on Biden to 'Impose Consequences' After Conviction of Hong Kong Activists**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell in a statement called on President Joe Biden to impose consequences on China after seven individuals in Hong Kong were convicted under a Beijing crafted law for participating in anti-government protests.

"It is essential the Biden administration work with like-minded partners to impose meaningful international consequences for Beijing's tightening grip on Hong Kong and its assault on the rule of law," McConnell said on Thursday.

State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in earlier remarks that the US administration would continue to impose costs on individuals cracking down on protesters in Hong Kong. Earlier on Thursday, seven activists in Hong Kong were convicted for organizing and taking part in anti-government protests in 2019. Among the seven convicted are owner of the Apple Daily Jimmy Lai, founder of the Democratic party Martin Lee and five former lawmakers.

Subversion was made a criminally punishable offense in Hong Kong last year under the Beijing-drafted national security law. According to Beijing, the legislation criminalizes activities related to terrorism, separatism, subversion of state power and collusion with foreign forces, while local pro-democracy activists and certain Western nations claim that the law undermines Hong Kong's civil liberties and democratic freedoms.

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#### **Biden Extends US Economic Sanctions Over Security Situation in Somalia - White House**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has signed an order extending for at least another year US economic sanctions imposed on Somalia that were previously approved by presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, the White House announced in a press release.

"The situation with respect to Somalia continues to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States," the president said on Thursday.

"For this reason, the national emergency declared on April 12, 2010, and the measures adopted on that date and on July 20, 2012 ... must continue in effect beyond April 12, 2021."

Biden said he was accordingly keeping the previous Executive Order 13556 in place for the next 12 months.

In the latest example of ongoing terrorist violence in the East African country, at least five civilians were killed as a result of a car bomb attack targeting an official in the Somalian capital of Mogadishu, media outlets said on Monday.

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**UNSC Deeply Concerned at Worsening Situation in Myanmar, Urges Military to Show Restraint**

UNITED NATIONS, April 1 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council expressed deep concern about the deteriorating situation in Myanmar and called on the country's military to exercise maximum restraint and pursue dialogue, , Vietnamese Ambassador to the United Nations Dang Dinh Quy said in a statement.

"The Members of the Security Council expressed deep concern at the rapidly deteriorating situation, and strongly condemned the use of violence against peaceful protestors and the deaths of hundreds of civilians, including women and children," Quy, who presides with the Security Council in April, said on Thursday.

"The Members of the Security Council reiterated their call on the military to exercise utmost restraint. They reiterated the need to fully respect human rights and to pursue dialogue and reconciliation in accordance with the will and interests of the people of Myanmar. They called on all sides to refrain from violence," he said.

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**Canada's AstraZeneca Vaccine Shipment From India Delayed for Unknown Period of Time**  
TORONTO, April 1 (Sputnik) - Canada's shipment from the Serum Institute of their version of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine is on hold for an undetermined period of time, a Public Services and Procurement Canada official said.

The delay comes after India announced a temporary hold on vaccine exports, as New Delhi concentrates on immunization at home due to a spike in domestic cases.

"We are working with the company on determining when the doses will arrive. We are expecting a delay in the shipment," Joelle Paquette told reporters on Thursday. "We do not have the information [about] when we're going to get the doses."

Paquette, however, noted Canada received assurances from the Serum Institute that they are committed to meeting their contractual obligations. Per the terms of a contract signed in February, Canada is set to receive an additional 1.5 million vaccine doses from the company by mid-May, in addition to the 500,000 doses received last month.

Canadian officials are expecting shipment of vaccines from the COVAX facility next week, Paquette said, although, adding that the World Health Organization co-led initiative does not provide a delivery schedule. Ottawa has been roundly criticized for being the only G7 country to

draw from the facility that is intended to ensure equitable distribution of vaccines to developing nations.

The previously delayed shipment of 600,000 Moderna vaccine doses will arrive on Friday, with deliveries beginning on Saturday, the government's vaccine distribution czar, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin, said.

Despite inking deals with numerous vaccine manufacturers, the Trudeau government has faced sharp criticism for a muted vaccine rollout program that has been labeled a failure by opposition parties and many Canadians, according to polling numbers.

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#### **Johnson & Johnson Vaccine Supplier Says 'Confident' Will Meet FDA Requirements**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Johnson & Johnson (J&J) vaccine supplier Emergent BioSolutions said in a statement that it acknowledges it botched a batch of vaccines but it remains confident in its ability to meet the US government safety requirements and standards. The statement comes a day after Johnson & Johnson reported on Wednesday that it found 15 million doses of vaccines to be unusable due to a human error in a Emergent Biosolutions' plant in the city of Baltimore.

"A single batch of drug substance was identified that did not meet specifications and our rigorous quality standards. We isolated this batch and it will be disposed of properly," the statement said on Thursday. "Discarding a batch of bulk drug substance, while disappointing, does occasionally happen during vaccine manufacturing, which is a complex and multi-step biological process."

Emergent BioSolutions said in the statement it remains confident the requirements it will meet the safety requirements and standards of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The Johnson & Johnson vaccine was approved for emergency use in the United States at the end of February, becoming the third vaccine to be authorized by the FDA in addition to the ones produced by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna.

On Wednesday, Johnson & Johnson said in a statement that it was still planning to supply 100 million doses by the end of June and was aiming to deliver those doses by the end of May.

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#### **Ex-Texas Sheriff Faces Second Evidence Tampering Charge Related to Death of Black Man**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Former Texas sheriff Robert Chody has been indicted with evidence tampering charges for a second time in connection to the death of African-American Javier Ambler, who died while in police custody, Travis County District Attorney Jose Garza's office said in a press release.

"Today, Travis County District Attorney Jose Garza announced the return of an indictment by a Travis County grand jury against former Williamson County Sheriff Robert Chody for the 3rd degree felony charge of Tampering with Physical Evidence for events surrounding the death of Javier Ambler," the release said on Thursday.

Chody turned himself in to authorities on Thursday and was booked into Travis County jail, but he was released on a \$15,000 bond.

The indictment alleges that Chody knowingly concealed or destroyed video recordings in order to impair an investigation into Ambler's in-custody death.

Former general counsel for the Williamson County Attorney's office, Jason Nassour, has also been charged a second time for tampering with evidence in Ambler's case.

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#### US Air Force Seeks Vandenberg Base in California to Host Future ICBM Training Unit

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Vandenberg Air Force Base in the state of California has been recommended as the site where operators of the future US Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) will train, the Air Force said.

"A final basing decision will be made after a required environmental impact analysis," an Air Force said in a press release on Thursday.

The GBSD is expected to replace all operational Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by 2036 in planned upgrade of US nuclear forces, the release added.

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#### Wall Street Begins April on High as S&P500 Hits 4,000 Points First Time Ever

NEW YORK, April 1 (Sputnik) - Wall Street began trading in April on a high as the S&P500 index closed on Thursday above 4,000 points the first time ever, extending this week's rally in US stocks on expectations that the \$2.3 trillion-dollar stimulus programs will fast-track economic recovery.

The S&P500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, closed up 47 points, or 1.2 percent, at a record high of 4,020 points. A day ago, the S&P finished March trading up 5.5 percent while gaining almost 6 percent for the first quarter.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index closed up 223 points, or 1.8 percent, at 13,480. Nasdaq, which groups high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, rose 4.1 percent for March and 2.8 percent for the first quarter.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest stock indicator comprising mostly industrial stocks, closed up 172 points, or 0.5 percent, at 33,153. For March, the Dow was up 6.7 percent, while for the first quarter, it rose 7.8 percent.

US stocks finished March and the quarter with a bang and continued their rally into April after President Joe Biden unveiled an infrastructure development program worth \$2.3 trillion, on the heels of a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package passed by Congress.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY  
WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) -

#### NORD STREAM 2

- \* Increased activity of foreign warships and aircraft was observed in the pipelaying area of the Russia-led Nord Stream 2 gas project, pipeline operator Nord Stream 2 AG said on Thursday.
- \* Russia has never used energy deliveries to Europe as an instrument of pressure and does not plan to, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, denying the United States' claims that Moscow is using the Nord Stream 2 pipeline as a tool for manipulation.

#### EU MEETING ON JCPOA

- \* The joint commission of the JCPOA on Iran's nuclear dossier will hold a video conference on Friday to discuss the possible return of the United States to the deal, the European External Action Service said in a statement on Thursday.
- \* The United States welcomes the announcement that Iran and the participants in the Joint Commission for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will speak on Friday and views it as a positive step, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said.

#### OPEC+ AGREEMENT

- \* OPEC+ has agreed to increase oil production in July by 441,000 barrels per day, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Thursday.
- \* Within the framework of the OPEC+ deal, Russia will evenly increase oil production in May-July by a total of 114,000 barrels per day, Novak said.
- \* OPEC+ countries will continue to meet on a monthly basis for now to make decisions depending on the situation on the oil market, Novak said.
- \* OPEC+ compliance with the oil output cut deal reached 115 percent in February, OPEC said in its communique.
- \* OPEC+ countries agreed to extend until the end of September 2021 the mechanism to compensate for the previously underreduced volumes of oil production, OPEC said.

#### US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- \* Russian President Vladimir Putin's response to unacceptable statements made by US President Joe Biden was diplomatic and polite and it is up to him to decide when the country's ambassador will return to Washington, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday.

\* The United States' deployment of missile defense systems in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region is part of its global project to contain Russia and China as well as to ensure its own absolute dominance, Lavrov said.

\* Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov and US Ambassador in Moscow John Sullivan met to discuss preparations for the United States' online climate summit and bilateral issues, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

\* The United States continues to review its diplomatic presence in Russia while taking into account staffing challenges and the general state of bilateral relations, but hoping to reopen one day its missions across the country, US State Department's spokesperson Ned Price told reporters.

#### NAGORNO-KARABAKH

\* Russian Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov and his Armenian counterpart Artak Davtyan discussed over the telephone Russia's peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh and military cooperation, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday.

\* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Azerbaijani counterpart, Jeyhun Bayramov, discussed the trilateral agreements on Karabakh and bilateral Moscow-Baku relations, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Azeri counterpart Ilham Aliyev discussed Nagorno-Karabakh during a phone conversation on Thursday and agreed that the situation in the region is stable, the Kremlin said.

#### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

\* NATO accuses Russia of undermining the efforts of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to de-escalate the situation in Ukraine, a NATO official told Sputnik on Thursday.

\* The United States is absolutely concerned about the latest flare-up in tensions along Ukraine's borders and is in close touch with Kiev and NATO allies on the matter, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

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#### US Air Force Moves Electric Helicopter on Transport Aircraft in 'Proof of Concept' Drill

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Airmen transported an electric helicopter designed for search and rescue missions on a military aircraft for the first time, the us Air Force said on Thursday.

"This effort was a proof of concept for the Air Force," the service said in a press release. "Air Force cargo specialists and flight engineers at LIFT Aircraft worked together to figure out configuration the eVTOL would need to be placed in for safe travel."

LIFT, a private company, developed the eVTOL, as electric-powered, single-seat aircraft with more than a dozen rotary blades, giving the device the appearance of a giant hobby drone, the release said.

The further integration and testing of the technology will ensure its employability in austere environments. In the future, operators expect this aircraft will be able to support a variety of missions, including personnel recovery and initial airfield assessment, the release added. The eVTOL was transported from the US state of Ohio to Texas last week, according to the release.

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**US Condemns Conviction of 7 Hong Kong Activists - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the conviction of seven activists that took part in anti-government protests in Hong Kong by the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Today's convictions in Hong Kong of seven pro-democracy activists on politically-motivated charges once again show the degree to which the PRC and Hong Kong authorities seek to crush all forms of peaceful dissent in the city," Price said during a press briefing.

Price said the United States continues to condemn China's actions in Hong Kong.

Earlier on Thursday, seven activists in Hong Kong were convicted for organizing and taking part in anti-government protests in 2019. Among the seven convicted are owner of the Apple Daily Jimmy Lai, founder of the Democratic party Martin Lee and five former lawmakers.

Subversion was made a criminally punishable offense in Hong Kong last year under the Beijing-drafted national security law. According to Beijing, the legislation criminalizes activities related to terrorism, separatism, subversion of state power and collusion with foreign forces, while local pro-democracy activists and certain Western nations claim that the law undermines Hong Kong's civil liberties and democratic freedoms.

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**Resuming Aid to Palestinians Remains US Priority - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The State Department is working with Congress to restore aid to the Palestinian people and regards the matter as a top priority, spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We have been clear that resuming assistance to the Palestinian people is a priority," Price said. "And we are working with Congress on this right now."

Last week, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield announced during a UN Security Council meeting on the situation in the Middle East \$15 million in humanitarian assistance to aid the most vulnerable communities in the West Bank and Gaza.

According to reports, Washington intends to deliver approximately \$125 million in aid that was appropriated mainly in the 2020 budget but was frozen by the Trump administration, The Hill reportedn citing a source in Congress.

Under former President Donald Trump's administration, the United States has halted practically all its civilian assistance to Palestinians, worth around \$500 million annually.

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#### US, Greek Defense Chiefs Discuss Cooperation on Threats to NATO - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III spoke with his Greek counterpart Nikos Panagiotopoulos to reaffirm mutual commitment to security in the Eastern Mediterranean and NATO's Southern Flank, the Defense Department said in a release on Thursday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke by phone today with Greek Minister of Defense Nikos Panagiotopoulos to reaffirm the strong and deepening security partnership between the United States and Greece," the release said. "The leaders committed to being vigilant regarding threats to stability in NATO's Southern Flank."

Austin welcomed the expansion of the US forces presence in Greece over the past year, including the homeporting of the USS Hershel "Woody" Williams expeditionary mobile base at Souda Bay, and attributed this to the 2019 update of the US-Greece Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement.

The US Defense Secretary also welcomed ongoing exploratory talks between NATO Allies Greece and Turkey and noted that Greece consistently exceeds NATO defense spending goals. The leaders also discussed Russia's alleged "maligned influence."

Russia has repeatedly warned that NATO's reckless military buildup in the region threatens to spark an unnecessary confrontation.

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#### US Lawmakers Introduce Bill to Provide \$1Bln to Handle Migrants on Border With Mexico

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Congressmen John Katko and Henry Cuellar on Thursday introduced a bipartisan measure to provide the federal government with \$1 billion to fund efforts to mitigate the influx of migrants arriving at the US border with Mexico.

"Authorizes an initial investment of \$1 billion to be appropriated, requires the maintenance the level of the fund up until 2025, allows the Treasury to invest a portion of the funds for the purpose of compounding interest, and returns the money to the Treasury after 2025," a summary of the legislation said.

The Border Surge Response and Resilience Act would create a framework that would enable the US government to anticipate migration surges and take immediate action to mitigate a humanitarian crisis, Cuellar said in a press release.

The United States is on pace to see a record number of migrants arriving at the southern border this year. So far, a total of 396,958 illegal migrants have been apprehended at the US southern border since October, according to US government data. About 100,441 illegal migrants were apprehended in February.

The monthly apprehension numbers for the month of March, which will be released in the coming days, are expected to surpass February's total.

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US, Russia Compete for Leadership in International Telecommunication Union

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Candidates from the United States and Russia vie for the position of Secretary General in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a UN agency for information and communication technologies, the State Department's spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

The US announced earlier support for its native Doreen Bogdan-Martin in the 2022 election. "Right now we are aware of only one other candidate. That's the candidate from the Russian Federation," Price said during a daily briefing.

He described US support for Bogdan-Martin, who has served at the ITU for 28 years, as "yet another element of the administration's renewed emphasis on multilateral tools and fora to tackle global issues."

"If elected, Ms. Bogdan-Martin would be the first woman to serve as the ITU Secretary General in the organization's 156 years of existence," Price said.

Founded in 1865, the ITU allocates global radio spectrum and satellite orbits, develops the technical standards that ensure networks and technologies seamlessly interconnect, and strives to improve access to information and communication technologies to underserved communities worldwide, according to the agency's website.

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Republican Senators Urge Democrat Majority to Hold Public Hearings on US Border Crisis

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Senate Republican leaders asked their Democratic counterparts, who hold a majority, to hold hearings on a surge in illegal immigrants crossing the southern US border, a letter from Senators Chuck Grassley and Ron Johnson to Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durban and Subcommittee Chairman Alex Padilla said on Wednesday.

"While we may not agree on the causes of or the solutions to this crisis, we believe it is vitally important for the Senate Judiciary Committee to exercise its oversight authority and seek testimony from [Health] Secretary [Alejandro] Mayorkas and relevant officials at US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the Department of Health and Human Services regarding the situation at the border and the Biden Administration's response to it," the letter said

Images released in recent days show thousands of children lying side by side with mylar blankets that cover the floors of makeshift detention facilities set up after President Joe Biden eliminated border control measures imposed during a similar crisis in 2019.

Most of those detained appear to be male adolescents who crossed into the United States without parents or adult guardians.

"Our recent visit to the Rio Grande Valley Sector of the southern border only served to reaffirm our view that the situation has gotten exponentially worse in the last three months, becoming a crisis, and that the Judiciary Committee should hold hearings on this topic, the letter said.

At the present rate, US border officials anticipate encountering more than 1 million migrants border crossers this year, similar to the 2019 crisis that featured waves of migrant caravans from Central America.

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US Raises Concerns Over Vietnamese Currency, Timber, Digital Trade Practices - USTR  
WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States has raised its concerns on Vietnam's currency maneuvers and illegal practices in timber, digital trade and agriculture, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai's office said after her virtual meeting on Thursday with Vietnamese Minister of Industry and Trade Tran Tuan Anh.

"Ambassador Tai highlighted the Biden Administration's concerns about currency practices covered in the ongoing Section 301 investigation," a statement from the office of the USTR said. "The ministers also discussed US concerns on illegal timber practices, digital trade and agriculture."

In January, the USTR expressed concerns over Vietnam's acts, policies, and practices related to currency valuation, concluding that Hanoi's "excessive foreign exchange market interventions and other related actions, taken in their totality, are unreasonable and burden or restrict US commerce".

In December, the USTR said it has opened an investigation into Vietnam's acts, policies and practices related to the import and use of timber that is illegally harvested or traded, "that may contribute to the undervaluation of its currency and the resultant harm caused to US commerce."

The statement on Thursday said Tai and Anh agreed to have "sustained dialogue in the future" and to hold a meeting later in the year under the US-Vietnam Trade and Investment Framework Agreement to assess progress in their trade relationship and in resolving bilateral issues.

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#### **Austin Urges Turkish Defense Chief Not to Retain Russian S-400 Systems - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in his phone conversation with Turkish Minister of National Defense Hulusi Akar called on Ankara not to retain the Russian-made S-400 missile defense systems, the Defense Department announced in a release on Thursday.

"Secretary Austin and Minister Akar discussed the instability along NATO's eastern and southern flanks, including challenges posed by Russia," the release said. "Secretary Austin noted the importance of working to strengthen US-Turkey military-to-military cooperation, and urged Turkey not to retain the Russian S-400 missile defense system."

Austin thanked Akar for Turkey's role in the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan and for its support of the ongoing peace process, the release said.

"The two leaders also discussed the positive diplomatic developments and efforts to reduce all tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, where the Secretary welcomed ongoing exploratory talks between NATO Allies Turkey and Greece and the commitment of both governments to this process," the release said. "Secretary Austin also highlighted cooperation among Allies and partners in the Black Sea, including recent exercises that included the USS Monterey and USS Thomas Hudner and Turkish naval assets."

Ankara's purchase of the S-400 systems has been a point of contention in US-Turkish relations since July 2019. Washington has demanded that Ankara refuse the deal, threatening to cancel deliveries of F-35 fighters. Ankara has so far resisted, even in the face of sanctions on its defense sector that were imposed in December 2020, and is negotiating with Russia the delivery of the second batch of S-400 systems.

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#### **US House to Have Most of Biden Infrastructure Funding Bill Ready by Early May - Pelosi**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Most of the US House legislation to push through President Joe Biden's \$2.3 billion infrastructure renewal plan should be ready by the end of the first week in May, Speaker Nancy Pelosi told a Capitol Hill press conference on Thursday.

"Much of [writing it should be complete] in the first week of May for the infrastructure portion of it and we will see when the Senate will act on it when we're ready," Pelosi said. "I do not set a date [for passing the legislation]. We are not in a position to do so. ... We would like to get the bill done soon."

Biden's plan seeks to modernize 20,000 miles of various roads, fix ten most economically significant bridges in the country and repair another 10,000 smaller ones. It will replace

thousands of buses and rail cars, repair hundreds of stations, renew airports, and expand transit and rail into new communities

"We are trillions of dollars behind [in infrastructure maintenance]. It is a safety issue when it comes to bridges. Some of the water systems in our country are more than 100 years old. Many of them are full of lead," Pelosi said.

Biden's plan calls for investing \$621 billion in transportation, \$580 billion in manufacturing, research and job training, \$313 billion in schools and housing, \$111 billion in water facilities and \$100 billion in digital infrastructure. Another \$400 million are expected to be spent on home care workers.

Critic's have said Biden's plan is leading the United States into hyperinflation, even an inflationary collapse, and capital flight.

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Austin, Ukraine Defense Minister Discuss Kiev's Defense Capability, Russia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin discussed with his Ukrainian counterpart Andrii Taran Kiev's ability to defend itself and Russia's activities in the region, the Defense Department said in a statement on Thursday.

"Secretary Austin reiterated the US commitment to building the capacity of Ukraine's forces to defend more effectively against Russian aggression," the statement read.

Austin reiterated the United States' support for Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity and reiterated Washington's accusations of Russia's alleged aggressive actions in Donbas region.

"Minister Taran expressed gratitude for the open dialogue and continued support," the statement said.

Russia has repeatedly refuted as groundless all accusations of military engagement in Eastern Ukraine conflict.

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Canada's Ontario to Implement 4-Week Lockdown Starting on Saturday - Premier

TORONTO, April 1 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario will go into a four-week lockdown effective Saturday amid a steady rise in coronavirus variant cases, Premier Doug Ford announced on Thursday.

"Effective, Saturday, April 3 at 12:01 a.m. [4:01 a.m. GMT], Ontario will pull the emergency break for the entire province," Ford told reporters. "All 34 public health regions will move into shutdown for a period of four weeks."

The latest lockdown - the third province-wide order since the onset of the pandemic last March - will not be a stay-at-home order, the province's health minister said. The order was too difficult on the province's residents the last time, according to Christine Elliott.

Ford emphasized that Ontario has the toughest restrictions in Canada, responding to concerns that the new lockdown measures are hardly different to what is already in place in the Toronto region, where most of the new cases are being identified.

Today's announcement was spurred by increasing numbers of new coronavirus variant cases in the province that by some estimates now make up two-thirds of all new cases.

New data from an expert panel advising the provincial government revealed Ontario could see daily caseloads nearly tripling - to nearly 6,000 - by the end of the month if no action is taken.

Ontario is reporting some 2,500 people testing positive for the novel coronavirus daily and the province has recorded 352,460 cases and nearly 7,400 virus-related deaths since the onset of the pandemic a year ago.

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**Biden Under Pressure From Democrats to Cancel Student Debt of Up to \$50,000 - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is under pressure from members of his Democratic party to cancel student debt of up to \$50,000 and has asked his education secretary to study the authority the White House has in executing such a move, CNBC reported on Thursday.

Although the president is reluctant to bypass Congress, he's under mounting pressure to do so from members of the Democratic party, as well as borrowers and consumer advocates, the report said. Biden has asked Education Secretary Miguel Cardona to draw up a memorandum on the president's legal authority in the matter.

The report quoted White House chief of staff Ron Klain as saying the memorandum could be ready in the next several weeks.

"And then he'll look at that legal authority, he'll look at the policy issues around that and he'll make a decision," Klain said.

Even before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March last year, about a quarter of student loan borrowers were in delinquency or default.

On the campaign trail for the White House last year, Biden said he supported \$10,000 in student loan forgiveness.

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**US Not in Business Trying to Engineer Regime Change in Syria - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States does not seek to engineer a regime change in Syria, but normalizing relations with the government of President Bashar Assad is also not on the table, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

"Assad, over the course of the ten years... hasn't regained that legitimacy in our eyes, and there is absolutely no question of the United States normalizing relations with his government," Price said. "We are at the same time not in the business of trying to engineer regime change in the region."

Price said Washington will focus on bringing about a political settlement in Syria and demanding accountability and justice for the Syrian people.

The war in Syria started in 2011 as part of the wider Arab Spring unrest, with numerous armed opposition factions and terrorist groups fighting to topple the government of President Bashar Assad. The US-led intervention in the Syrian conflict began in 2014 with a stated goal to defeat the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) and remove Assad from power.

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US Healthcare Firm Zimedica, Moderna Partner to Develop Mobile Vaccine Making Platform

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Moderna partnered with the healthcare equipment maker Zimedica to create a mobile system to manufacture future vaccines using the technology behind Moderna's coronavirus vaccine, Zimedica said on Friday.

"Integrating Moderna's proprietary mRNA technology with Zimedica's instrument design and engineering expertise, both teams will work closely together in an effort to meet capability expectations set out by the DARPA program over the 4-year partnership," Zimedica said in a press release.

The effort is sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), a Defense Department unit that researches nucleic acids such as RNA and DNA.

Messenger RNA (mRNA) technology provided the basis for Moderna's coronavirus vaccine. DARPA is known for developing exotic inventions such as GPS navigation that often yield technology for everyday use. Many pundits credit the agency with inventing the internet.

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Canada, Ukraine Top Diplomats Voice 'Concerns' Over Reported Russian Troop Movement

TORONTO, April 1 (Sputnik) - Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau in a call with Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba voiced his concerns over reports about Russian military movements near the border with Ukraine, Global Affairs Canada said on Thursday.

"Minister Garneau expressed Canada's concerns regarding the recent destabilizing Russian actions, including the movement of troops near Ukraine's borders and in occupied Crimea," Global Affairs Canada said in a statement.

Garneau also condemned Moscow for the deaths of four Ukrainian soldiers during flare-up of the country's ongoing civil conflict on March 26. Russia vehemently denies any military involvement in the conflict in East Ukraine.

In addition, the two foreign ministers also discussed the downed Ukraine International Airlines flight 752, with Canada's vowing to seek "answers, justice and reparations" for the families and loved ones of the victims.

Iran's Civil Aviation Organization, which oversaw the investigation, concluded last month that PS752 was brought down inadvertently by an Iranian missile after being mistaken for a hostile target amid confrontation with the United States.

Earlier on Thursday, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the Russian military can move around within its borders as it so pleases and does not threaten anyone. Peskov added that Russia is taking measures along its borders amid increased NATO activity in the region.

Crimea rejoined Russia on March 16, 2014, after over 95 percent of voters backed the move in a referendum, which followed a violent power change in Ukraine. Two days later, an agreement on Crimea's accession to the Russian Federation was signed.

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US Approach Toward North Korea Must Be in Lockstep With Allies - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States' approach on North Korea must be done in coordination with its allies, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday ahead of the high-level trilateral meeting with Japan and South Korea.

"We have said that denuclearization will remain at the center of American policy towards North Korea," Price said during a press briefing. "We also know that any approach towards North Korea in order to be effective will be one that we will have to execute in lockstep with our close allies, including in this case our treaty allies Japan and South Korea."

On Friday, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will participate in a trilateral meeting with his counterparts in Japan and South Korea to discuss matters concerning North Korea, Price said.

During the meeting, Sullivan will preview the status of the Biden administration's policy review on North Korea.

White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that the US administration's review of its policy on North Korea is in the final stages.

The dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang has stalled since the failed February 2019 summit in Hanoi, during which the United States demanded more decisive steps from North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and Pyongyang accused Washington of not responding to the steps already taken. The 2019 October talks in Sweden failed to break the deadlock.

The inter-Korean dialogue is also at a low point following North Korea's decision to cut all lines of communication with Seoul last June.

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US Continues Review of Diplomatic Presence in Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to review its diplomatic presence in Russia while taking into account staffing challenges and the general state of bilateral relations, but hoping to reopen one day its missions across the country, US State Department's spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

The US government informed Russian authorities earlier that its Consulate in Vladivostok will remain in "suspended status" while the Consulate-General in Yekaterinburg is pausing visa and US citizen services.

"We continue to review our diplomatic presence in Russia to ensure that we are able to carry out our important diplomatic activities, including providing services to American citizens safely and securely in the face of ongoing staffing challenges," Price said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson explained the decision to continue the suspension of operations was made after "months of careful review of US foreign policy goals, the state of the bilateral relationship... and ongoing staffing challenges as well."

"Because of our strong connection with the Russian people we hope one day it will be possible to reopen diplomatic missions across the Russian Federation, but we are unable to predict at this point when that might be [possible]," Price said.

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White House Says California Shooting Underscores Need for Passing Gun Control Laws

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The shooting in California underscores the need for laws to expand background checks and ban assault arms, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

At least four people were killed and two others, including the suspected shooter, injured in a shooting in a business complex in Orange, California on Wednesday evening.

"The disturbing news of gun violence in Orange [County] California that resulted in a tragic loss of lives, innocent lives, last night is yet another example of senseless gun violence that occurs all too frequently and underscores the need for legislation to expand background checks, something that's worked its way through the House [and] something that President [Joe Biden] certainly supports, to ban assault weapons and high capacity magazines and remove liability protections for gun manufacturers," Psaki said at a briefing.

She stressed that there is an ongoing review of executive actions.

The shooting comes in the heels of the mass shooting last week when ten people were killed at a King Soopers supermarket in Boulder, located about 25 miles (40 km) from Denver. Eric Talley, a 51-year-old police officer who was first to run to the aid of the victims, was among the dead. A 21-year-old male suspect later identified as Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissaa was arrested about 50 minutes after the shooting began.

Following the tragedy, Biden called on lawmakers to impose a ban on assault weapons in the aftermath of the mass shooting in Boulder, Colorado, and close the existing loopholes in background check system.

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US 'Absolutely Concerned' by Tensions on Ukraine Borders, in Touch With Kiev - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is absolutely concerned about the latest flare-up in tensions along Ukraine's borders and is in close touch with Kiev and NATO allies on the matter, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

"We are discussing our concerns about that increase in tensions and ceasefire violations and regional tensions with NATO allies... and Ukraine as well. We will continue to be in close touch with our partners in Kiev and in Ukraine more broadly in the face [of] these recent escalations," Price said during a daily briefing, adding that the US is aware of reports concerning alleged Russian troop movements on the borders.

Russia denies any military involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

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US Welcomes EU Meeting on JCPOA as 'Positive Step' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the announcement that Iran and the participants of the Joint Commission for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will speak on Friday and views it as a positive step, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing.

"We obviously welcome this as a positive step, and that's precisely because we have been clear for weeks now that we are ready to pursue a return to compliance with our JCPOA commitments consistent with Iran also doing the same," Price said on Thursday.

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Canada's Ontario to Go Into 4-Week COVID-19 Lockdown Starting on Saturday - Premier

TORONTO, April 1 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario will go into a four-week lockdown effective Saturday amid a steady rise in variant cases of the coronavirus disease, Premier Doug Ford announced on Thursday.

"Effective, Saturday, April 3 at 12:01 a.m. [4:01 a.m. GMT], Ontario will pull the emergency break for the entire province," Ford told reporters. "All 34 public health regions will move into shutdown for a period of four weeks."

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**Texas Governor Says Illegal Migrants Caught at US-Mexico Border From 'Terrorist Countries'**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Thursday that some illegal migrants apprehended on the US southern border with Mexico are people of special interest for the authorities who are arriving from terrorist countries.

"Yes, in fact, there had been people who are called special interest arrests, people who are coming from countries with ties to terrorism and that's one of the extreme dangers that we face," Abbott said during a press conference.

Abbott also said that illegal migrants from terrorist countries pay a substantial amount of money to criminal cartel groups in Mexico to smuggle them into the United States.

President Joe Biden must inform the public that terrorists are trying to enter into the United States illegally through the border in Texas and his administration must boost efforts to address the issue, Abbott said.

On March 15, US House Homeland Security ranking Republican John Katko said some migrants entering the United States illegally through the southwest border are on the US terrorist watchlist. US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said some of the recently-apprehended illegal migrants on the terrorist watchlist are from Iran, Yemen and Sri Lanka.

The United States is on pace to see a record number of migrants arriving at the southern border this year. So far, a total of 396,958 illegal migrants have been apprehended at the US southern border since October, according to US government data. About 100,441 illegal migrants were apprehended in February.

The monthly apprehension numbers for the month of March, which will be released in the coming days, are expected to surpass February's total.

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**US Working With IMF on \$650Bln Allocation for Global COVID-19 Recovery - Treasury**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on a \$650 billion allocation for the global COVID-19 recovery, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Thursday.

"Treasury is working with IMF management and other members toward a \$650 billion general allocation of SDRs [special drawing rights] to IMF member countries," the statement said.

Reserving additional assets would help support the global recovery, while strong reconciliation abroad would help the US economy by increasing demand for exports of goods and services, as well as creating jobs and supporting businesses, the statement explained.

"An allocation of IMF Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) would help build reserve buffers, smooth adjustments, and mitigate the risks of economic stagnation in global growth," the statement said.

This is only one in a range of tools to support the global recovery internationally, the statement added. This package includes robust support from the IMF, multilateral development banks, other national and international measures, the statement added.

IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice said last week that the Fund conducted initial discussions on allocating additional \$650 billion in special drawing rights in support of the global COVID-19 recovery. IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva has indicated that she would raise the issue at the IMF Executive Board meeting in June, Rice said.

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UN Chief Appoints Polish Diplomat Wronecka as New Special Envoy for Lebanon - Spokesman UNITED NATIONS, April 1 (Sputnik) - Polish Permanent Representative to the United Nations Joanna Wronecka has been appointed to serve as UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres today announced the appointment of Ms. Joanna Wronecka of Poland as his new Special Coordinator for Lebanon, United Nations Office of the Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL)," Dujarric said.

Wronecka will succeed Jan Kubis, who was selected as UN's new Special Envoy for Libya in January.

Dujarric said Wronecka will depart to Lebanon as soon as possible.

Wronecka has served in the position Permanent Representative of Poland since 2017 and brings over 25 years of experience in diplomacy, international security and Middle East Affairs. In 2015-2017, Wronecka served as Under Secretary of State for Arab and African countries, development cooperation and Polish-United Nations relations at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

She has also served as ambassador to Morocco and Egypt, and Director of the Africa and Middle East Department at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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## Student Draws Left-Right Backing in US Supreme Court Case Over Free Speech - Rights Group

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) – An unusual alliance of US Liberals and Conservatives urged the US Supreme Court to rule in favor of a high-school freshman suspended from the cheerleading squad for a social media post made when the student was not in school, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said on Thursday.

"The case asks what free speech rights public school students should have outside school, and the Supreme Court's decision will define the scope of young people's free speech rights 24 hours a day, 365 days a year," the ACLU said in a press release.

Friend of the court briefs were filed by more than 100 organizations, more than 250 individuals, and nine Republican state attorneys urging the Supreme Court to protect young people's First Amendment's rights in what the ACLU called "the most important student free speech case in decades."

A high school freshman in the state of Pennsylvania identified only as B.L. sued her school district after being suspended from the cheerleading squad for a social media post saying: "Fuck school fuck cheer fuck softball fuck everything," according to the ACLU.

The ACLU is representing the student, who posted the message over the weekend when out of school.

The ACLU press release includes a long and unusually diverse list of groups backing the student, including attorneys general from nine Republican-led states: Louisiana, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Texas, and Utah .

Among politically liberal groups, supporters included the National Women's Law Center, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, Lambda Legal Defense Fund, and more than 30 other civil rights groups.

"You won't find another case in the past decade with such a diverse range of groups on the same side," ACLU National Legal Director David Cole said in the release. "That's because young people's freedom of speech isn't a conservative issue, a liberal issue, a Democratic issue, or a Republican issue. It's an American issue that affects all of us."

The Supreme Court has scheduled oral arguments in the case on April 28.

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## IMF Board Approves \$270.83Mln to Namibia to Address Negative Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Namibia will receive over \$270.83 million to address urgent needs caused by the negative impact of the measures implemented to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic, the International Monetary Fund said in a release on Thursday.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved today an outright purchase of SDR 191.1 million (about US\$270.83 million) to Namibia under the Rapid Financing

Instrument (RFI)," the release said. "This will help the country address urgent balance of payments and fiscal financing needs stemming from the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic."

The IMF pointed out in the release that the worsening global conditions and a local outbreak have deteriorated Namibia's short-term macroeconomic outlook, hindered mining exports, tourism, investment inflows and weighed on tax revenues.

"The Namibian economy is estimated to have sharply contracted by 7.2 percent in 2020, and the recovery is set to remain subdued at 2.1 percent in 2021," the release said.

The purchase under the RFI will give the required funds to help the authorities' carry out their response to the crisis caused by the pandemic, including procuring vaccines and undertaking efforts to mitigate the pandemic's socio-economic impact, the release said.

Earlier in March, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said that Namibia became the 50th country to authorize Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V.

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**Biden's Corporate Tax Reform to Pay for American Jobs Plan Investments - US Treasury**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The changes to the US corporate tax code that will be introduced by President Biden's American Jobs Plan will pay for projects and investments over the next 15 years, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement on Thursday.

"The plan revamps a flawed corporate tax code that incentivizes off-shoring and, instead, rewards companies that invest in America's workers," Yellen said. "It also pays, over the next 15 years, for projects and investments that will build the planet's most state-of-the-art infrastructure and make America's workers the most highly-skilled in the world."

Yellen said Biden's plan will end the global race for lower taxes and make corporations stop taking out their profits into tax havens abroad.

Yellen noted that schools, infrastructure and new technologies have been underfunded in the past 40 years while the American Jobs Plan is set to fix that problem and provide the base for development over the next 40 years.

Biden unveiled on Wednesday a \$2 trillion plan to upgrade US infrastructure with funding expected to come from a proposed increase in taxes on large corporations. Critics have warned that Biden's plan will lead to hyperinflation, even an inflationary collapse, and cause a capital flight.

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**Biden Orders Pentagon to Remove Patriot Systems, Forces From Persian Gulf Region - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has ordered the Department of Defense to start removing Patriot anti-missile systems, other military hardware and forces from the Persian Gulf region so that they can be deployed elsewhere to counter Russia and China, the Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday, citing officials knowledgeable with the matter. The Defense Department has moved three Patriot systems out of the region, including one that was located in Saudi Arabia's Prince Sultan Air Base. It has also moved an aircraft carrier, surveillance systems and other military capabilities out of the Middle East, the report said. Some of the military hardware could be redeployed to focus on Russia and China, two countries which the Pentagon sees as its primary global competitors, the report said. US officials are considering proposals to pull additional military equipment out of the region, including a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD anti-missile system, surveillance drones and antimissile batteries.

The Defense Department declined to discuss details but generally confirmed the potential changes in the force deployment.

"Without speaking to specific capabilities, we continue to take a strategic approach to the allocation of forces and routinely make adjustments to account for a wide number of factors," Defense Department spokesperson Jessica McNulty told Sputnik.

McNulty said the US military continues working with combatant commanders and services in order to prove Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ideas on resource allocations for operations around the world according to priorities, threats and opportunities.

The report explained that part of the rationale for moving the equipment is that the United States wants Saudi Arabia to assume more of the burden of defending its own territory.

With that goal in mind, the Defense Department has assembled a "Tiger Team" of officials to explore ways to help Saudi Arabia protect its facilities and oil installations. Options under discussion include sales of missile interceptors, expanded intelligence sharing and additional military training, the report said.

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#### **US Sends New Osprey Tiltrotor Detachment for Africa Command Air Support - Marine Corps**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The US military has sent a replacement squadron of Osprey tiltrotor aircraft to Moron Air Base in Spain to provide aviation support for operations in Africa, the US Marine Corps Forces in Europe and Africa announced in a press release on Thursday. "A new detachment of US Marine Corps aircraft has arrived at Moron Air Base, Spain, to support US Africa Command's (AFRICOM) ability to respond to crises in the African continent and to protect American facilities, personnel and interests," the release said.

Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 261 assumed the mission of providing aviation support to AFRICOM's North and West Africa Response Force on Thursday, the release said.

"We are going to work hard alongside the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team to accomplish our shared crisis response mission in North and West Africa, supporting our allies and partners in the region," VMM-261 Commanding Officer Travis Stephenson said in the release.

Both the incoming and outgoing squadrons deployed from the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing and are home based at Marine Corps Air Station New River in the US state of North Carolina, the release said.

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US Renews Travel Advisory on Ivory Coast Due to High COVID-19, Crime Rates - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The US government has renewed its Level 3 Travel Advisory warning against travel to the West African nation of Ivory Coast because of concerns about coronavirus cases and widespread crime there, the Department of State said in a media note on Thursday.

"The Department of State renewed its Travel Advisory for Cote d'Ivoire [Ivory Coast] on April 1, 2021," the note said. "The Department continues to advise travelers to reconsider travel to Cote d'Ivoire. This replaces the previous Travel Advisory issued on February 1, 2021."

US citizens should reconsider their travel plans to the country due to coronavirus and crime, and those already in the country should exercise increased caution due to civil unrest and terrorism, the note said.

"Extremists have carried out attacks in areas of Mali and Burkina Faso adjacent to Cote d'Ivoire and at an Ivoirian military border post in the town of Kafolo in June 2020," the note said.

Visitors to the country should therefore exercise increased caution and security procedures in remote areas adjacent to the Ivory Coast's northern border, the note added.

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Fauci Confirms US Food and Drug Administration Probe Into Faulty Coronavirus Vaccines

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is investigating an accident at a manufacturing facility that ruined millions of Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccines, the White House Chief Medical Adviser Anthony Fauci said on Thursday.

"It was human error. The FDA is investigating," Fauci told CBS News.

Earlier on Thursday, Johnson & Johnson admitted the incident at the East Baltimore facility belonging to its partner company Emergent Biosolutions. An accidental mix-up of ingredients reportedly led to the production of up to 15 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson single-component coronavirus vaccine.

"People should realize that all the doses that have been distributed to us and have been administered didn't come from that plant. This is not related in any way to any of the Johnson & Johnson doses that people have already gotten," Fauci said.

Fauci also said the Emergent Biosolutions plant was not fully certified by the FDA.

Emergent BioSolutions has a history of previous citations for quality control issues and has been criticized by the FDA after inspections for poorly trained employees, cracked vials and mold around one of its facilities, media reported.

Johnson & Johnson said in a statement that it was still planning to supply 100 million doses by the end of June and was aiming to deliver those doses by the end of May. The company's vaccine was approved for emergency use in the US at the end of February, becoming the third to be authorized by the FDA in addition to the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna products.

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**UNICEF Urges Wealthier Nations to Share Vaccines Through COVAX Facility- Regional Director**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - UNICEF is calling on wealthier countries to stop "vaccine nationalism" and share coronavirus vaccines through the COVAX facility, Middle East and North Africa Regional Director Ted Chaiban said during the World Health Organization (WHO) EMRO Press Conference on Thursday.

"It is important that we address the vaccine holistically. Protecting high-income countries alone will not allow life to return to normal," Chaiban said. "We urge wealthier nations to consider sharing doses that they have through the COVAX facility with the rest of the world."

Chaiban emphasized that the whole world may remain vulnerable to the novel coronavirus until all countries are at the equal level of protection urged an end to what he called was vaccine nationalism.

"We call on the private sector to come forward and partner with the COVAX to help in increasing the deliveries and the equitable distribution of the vaccines," he said. "We also call on vaccine manufacturers to rapidly license, sub-contract and share the technology and the know-how with vaccine manufacturing partners - without volume or geographical restrictions - to rapidly scale supply. All barriers to capacity expansion should be removed including Intellectual Property Rights barriers."

UNICEF has delivered more than 3 million vaccines doses to ten countries in the Middle East and North Africa on behalf of the COVAX facility, with the latest deliveries carried out to Yemen and Egypt yesterday.

The WHO has set the goal to start vaccination in all countries within the first 100 days of the year. According to the WHO chief, 36 countries are yet to begin vaccinating, however 16 of them are set to receive first batched through the COVAX mechanism in the upcoming two weeks.

In total, 177 countries have started mass vaccination campaigns. The COVAX facility has distributed more than 32 million vaccines to 61 countries.

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## US Drug Maker Price Gouges Consumers With Medicine Made With Gov't. Funds - Lawmakers

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The anti-viral drug Remdesivir, developed with \$162 million in government subsidies and priced at \$3,120, reflects a common practice by drug companies of using federally funded research to rip off consumers, Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney and Senator Debbie Stabenow charged on Thursday.

The lawmakers based their charges on a report by the General Accountability Office (GAO) earlier in the week that detailed government subsidies paid to the drug company Gilead Sciences and prices the company charges for a five-day treatment with Remdesivir, the first drug granted emergency use authorization to treat COVID-19.

"The GAO's report on Remdesivir is unfortunately just the latest example of a drug company charging an unconscionable price for a drug developed with millions in taxpayer-funded research," Maloney, who is chair of the US House Oversight Committee, said in a joint press release.

Stabenow said the report "exposes how the American people are being ripped off by drug companies," that use taxpayer funds to develop lifesaving drugs.

Stabenow and the late Congressman Elijah Cummings, Maloney's predecessor as chair of the Oversight Committee, requested the GAO report following reports in 2019 that Gilead had infringed on government-owned intellectual property relevant to the company's HIV prevention drug Truvada.

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## Layoffs by US Employers Down 86% in March From Height Year Ago - Survey

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The number of monthly layoffs in the United States has fallen 86 percent from the height amid the restrictive measures implemented to combat the coronavirus pandemic a year ago, labor market consultancy Challenger, Gray & Christmas said in a private survey published on Thursday.

"It appears we have entered a recovery phase where job eliminations are slowing and companies are able to predict and assess where growth will occur," the consultancy's Senior Vice President Andrew Challenger said in the survey, which cited 30,603 job cuts last month versus 222,288 in March of 2020.

Month-on-month, the layoffs reported in March were down 11 percent from the 34,531 cuts announced in February, the survey said. For January to March this year, there were 144,686 layoffs, down 58 percent from the 346,683 reported in the first quarter of 2020.

The cuts were led by companies in the aerospace/defense industry, which announced 31,073 layoffs in March. This is 338 percent higher than the 7,090 cuts announced through the same period of last year in that sector. Telecommunications follows with 24,157 cuts, up 112 percent from the 11,409 reported last year, as companies in this sector pivoted to new technologies.

While layoffs plunged, hirings remained markedly lower for the first quarter of this year versus last year. Challenger said there were just 316,233 job additions announced for January-March, down 66 percent from the 824,610 reported in the same period of 2020.

A year into the crisis induced by the government restrictive measures amid the coronavirus outbreak, restoring jobs growth remains one of the biggest challenges of US policy makers. Some 719,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that showed weekly filings back above the 700,000 level that economists say demonstrates the job market's struggle to turn the corner.

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#### **Biden Orders Pentagon to Remove Patriots, Forces Out of Persian Gulf Region - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has ordered the Pentagon to start removing Patriot anti-missile systems, other military hardware and forces from the Persian Gulf region and could deploy them elsewhere to counter Russia and China, the Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday, citing officials.

The Pentagon has moved three Patriot systems out of the region, including one that was located in Saudi Arabia's Prince Sultan Air Base. It has also moved an aircraft carrier, surveillance systems and other military capabilities out of the Middle East, the report said. Some of the military hardware could be redeployed to focus on Russia and China, two countries which the Pentagon sees as its primary global competitors, the report said.

US officials are considering proposals to pull additional military equipment out of the region, including a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD anti-missile system, surveillance drones and antimissile batteries.

Part of the rationale for moving the equipment is that the Pentagon wants Saudi Arabia to assume more of the burden of defending its own territory, the report said.

Toward that goal, the Pentagon has assembled a "tiger team" of officials to explore ways to help the kingdom protect its facilities and oil installations. Options under discussion include sales of missile interceptors, expanded intelligence sharing and additional military training, the report said.

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#### **US Jobless Claims Above 700,000, Showing COVID-19 Hurdle to Recovery - Labor Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Some 719,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that showed weekly filings back above the 700,000 level that economists say demonstrates the job market's struggle to turn the corner with the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending March 27, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 719,000, an increase of 61,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.

In the previous week to March 20, filings for jobless benefits fell to 684,000, the lowest number since the COVID-19 breakout a year ago.

Economists polled by US media had forecast 675,000 filings for last week to continue with the narrative of an improving labor market.

"The policymakers at the Fed are likely still concerned about the high levels for the initial claims," Greg Michalowski, economist at ForexLive said, referring to the Federal Reserve. "The pre-pandemic levels were around 250,000 to 280,000."

Some economists, however, pointed to the persistent drop in continuing jobless weekly claims as a sign of labor market progress. Continuing weekly claims — reported with a one-week lag — slid to 3.79 million for the week ended March 27, from 3.84 million during the week to March 20.

The weekly reading for annual unemployment was unchanged at 2.7 percent, though policymakers tend to look at the monthly unemployment rate as a better gauge of the overall jobs picture. The last monthly unemployment rate published by the Labor Department was 6.2 percent for February. The department will issue the March jobs report on Friday.

A year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring jobs growth remains one of the biggest challenges of US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 10 million of those jobs may have not returned, data shows.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said last month the US central bank will likely keep rates at near-zero for the next two years until the annual employment rate fell to 4.0 percent or lower, denoting "maximum employment."

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 719,000 Last Week - Labor Dept.

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